

Judge Karen Lawson

## Lake County Juvenile Court

# New Voices Girls self-esteem program

The New Voices Program was launched in January, 2010 under the direction of Judge Karen Lawson to address low self esteem in young women involved in the juvenile justice system. This self esteem group is cognitive behavioral based, teaching girls to use their voices to speak for themselves and recognize that they can make positive choices in their lives.

The New Voices team consists of female court staff led by a program director and two co-facilitators. Referrals to the program come from the bench, intake officers, and probation officers. Upon completion of the referral packet the youth is assessed by program staff through interviews with the intake/ probation officer and a review of all pertinent social information. This assessment allows the team to group girls with similar issues which in turn help to create the groups' identity and goals.

Group size is limited to 8 girls and each session is 8 weeks long. Weeks one through seven are educational in nature and week eight is graduation night. Topics covered range from personal values, relationship issues, family issues, peers, bullying, internet safety, decision making, personal goals and ones journey ahead. A self esteem work book is purchased for the girls to use during the group and to take with them upon completion. The girls are encouraged to continue

using this work book on their own or with their therapist if they are involved in counseling. Feedback from the therapeutic community has been very positive in continuing this work.

Group is held once a week for three hours in the evening from 5:30- 8:30pm during which a light dinner is provided. These dinners help teach social skills that in turn improves the girls self esteem. Group activities include readings and discussion and art projects such as painting and collage. Guest speakers address individual goals and present their own journey to becoming successful community leaders. All group work stresses core values and how they affect the girl's choices and decisions in life.

Another strong component of the program is the modeling of positive behavior. Judge Lawson and many female court staff volunteer to add material to the curriculum based upon personal experiences they believe would be helpful to the girls. In addition to court staff, volunteers from the community have contributed their own stories and successes. This community partnership includes all aspects of functional, positive living. Community Partners include the Western Reserve Junior Service League, Lake Erie College, Lakeland Community College, and Partners with Paws, a service based on the care and training of therapy dogs.

The New Voices Program is an educational yet personal journey for these girls. With the small number of girls in the group this program is able to build relationships that young ladies often crave. These girls want to be heard. They want someone to listen. This group does both while sharing information the girls need to make better choices as they mature into young adults. The girls become aware of the power they possess within themselves when they learn to believe in themselves through self esteem.